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June 13, 1949

MEMORANDUM OF CONVERSATION

Date: June 13, 1949  
Present: Dr. Bergstrom; ☐ ☐ CIA;  
Miss Blue, DRF; Mr. Barnes, DRE

The conversation consisted of brief general questions asked Dr. Bergstrom, and of his replies. The latter were clear and comprehensive, and generally touched on various aspects of the subject under inquiry rather than being restricted to short specific answers. His readiness to expand on a topic made the conversation easy as well as informative. A brief summary of Dr. Bergstrom's remarks follows:

He spoke first of his own experiences shortly after war broke out. In the late summer and fall of 1941 Soviet scientists were leaving threatened areas such as Leningrad, and taking positions wherever they could find them at points farther in the interior. Dr. Bergstrom chose Elista, the capital of the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic, primarily because his family were in that region at the time; they had evidently left Leningrad before him. He mentioned that there was then a strong feeling that Turkey would be at war with the Soviet Union before long, and that this factor had influenced some people to avoid points like Baku, which might be more vulnerable. By the time he left Leningrad in August 1941, transportation was already considerably disrupted. The trip was made principally by waterway and motor vehicle, and took 25 days. From his observations in the Kalmyk region during 1941 and 1942, and from extended travel previously through areas inhabited by Asiatic minorities of the USSR, he made the following comments:

The Kalmyks were predominantly anti-Soviet during the war, and the same held for most of the other minority races with which he was familiar. He spoke particularly of the natives of Turkmenistan, Tadzhikistan and Uzbekistan as constituting a "powder keg." Dissatisfaction was also rife in the Western Ukraine and the Crimea. The Kazakhs were said to be less affected, since their culture is more primitive, and they were even farther removed from any influences of West or South. In consequence they were less inclined to make unfavorable comparisons with conditions inside the USSR. He spoke of the Armenians as being an exception, being pro-Soviet largely out of fear of the Turks.

The Western Buryat Mongols were described as being backward, but to some extent Russianized, in contrast to those East of Lake Baikal who were Buddhist and genuinely Oriental by tradition. The Outer Mongolian is extremely primitive, with no appreciation or liking for any of the amenities of civilization. Due to their imperviousness to Western standards of living the Soviets had been able to use regiments of Mongols in

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SECRET

2

the war, whereas they had not dared to put Central Asian troops in the front line for fear of defection, but kept them occupied behind the lines.

The principal reason advanced for anti-Soviet attitudes was the simple objection to regimentation; a dislike of being coerced into collective farms or factories, and a dislike of the NKVD. Religion also played a definite role, it was said, as well as a streak of conservatism which is strong in that part of the world; the tendency to cling to local habits and customs. The dislike of breaking with old traditions was shown in even such matters as the script used in writing. Abolition of the Arabic script was extremely unpopular because the Koran had been written in it, and consequently the script itself became to some extent holy. Not being allowed to make the pilgrimage to Mecca was another serious grievance for the devout Mohammedan.

Nationalism too was by no means dead, although the speaker felt that abstract nationalism alone was not a very powerful force. It was rather the belief that self-rule would be a means to greater freedom. He said that the youth of the country was somewhat affected by Soviet propaganda over the last decades, and that the religious motive played less of a part in their thinking. However he added that the Germans were able to recruit whole divisions from these Asiatic peoples to fight against the Soviets, largely made up of men from 18 to 25 years old who were certainly not pro-Soviet; he had become acquainted with some of these men in Berlin, where he had gone after the German retreat.

At the same time, he felt that the majority of people in Central Asia did not want to return to the conditions that prevailed before 1917. There have been some economic advances, and opportunities for education and medical attention were somewhat improved. The old system had been semi-feudal, and the people now want to retain some of the advantages they had gained, but to get rid of the compulsion that came with them.

The improvement has affected the lowest classes most, whereas those who were somewhat better off have fared relatively worse. In the old days a nomad of property was in many ways much more prosperous than the average Russian peasant. After the Revolution, the standards moved closer together; all were treated alike, but the nomad missed his liberty more. It is incorrect to say that the Russian is unpopular in Central Asia because he enjoys unusual prerogatives which the native does not. On a racial basis, there is something near equality. The inequality, there as elsewhere, comes from other causes. A small class of office holders do have special privileges, whether Russian or native, and quite a number are Russian. But the Russian population in these regions is made up to a large extent of deportees, who enjoy few prerogatives except the security of a labor camp.

As the Germans retreated and the Red Armies swept back, a great many Kalmyks, and evidently other minority peoples, went with the invaders back into Germany. Women and children, and some men, went into hiding

SECRET

SECRET

3

in the mountains. NKVD troops then came in and settled down, but bothered the inhabitants very little for the first 3 or 4 months. During this time people gradually returned to their homes, emboldened by the fact that there was no persecution. Then, in one day, trucks were brought in by hundreds, the native population was rounded up by thousands, and shipped off to Siberia or the slopes of the Urals. A similar fate met the Crimean Tartars, the Karachai and Cherkessi (Circassians), some of whom went to Siberia and some to different parts of Central Asia, farther East. It was said that there are no Tartars or Greeks left in the Crimea.

The story so often heard, as to how badly the Germans mismanaged their relations with groups in the Soviet Union who were ready to be their allies, was given an effective twist by the statement: "If the Nazi advisers on Russian questions had wanted to sabotage the German war effort, they could not have done a better job." The German military was said to have been less obnoxious in its treatment of the Soviet populations, but when the civilian bosses took over the situation became very much worse. Even so, many of the minority races, caught between two fires, preferred to stay with the Germans.

The peoples of Central Asia were said to feel a strong natural sympathy for India -- or rather that part of India now Pakistan --, as being most representative of their own traditions. The speaker knew less about the attitude toward Afghanistan, although he mentioned that a number of Uzbek leaders had fled to that country at one time or another; in 1938 the native Uzbek political leaders were executed almost en masse. Relations with Iran were complicated by the rivalries between the Shiite and the Sunni Moslems, which tended to turn the Azerbaidjanians against the Iranians. As to the Turks, there was a tendency on the part of the older Central Asian peoples, whose traditions came down from Tamerlane, to regard them as something like younger brothers and to look down on them from a cultural point of view. The effort of Enver Pasha to create a Turanian state in the 20's had not been particularly popular.

A few specific comments were made on educational institutions. The speaker had been at the University of Tashkent in 1929 and 1930, where there were about 1,000 students, and some 200 teachers, professors and research workers. Faculties of law, medicine, languages, etc. were operating, and the University was under jurisdiction of the (now) Ministry of Higher Education. In addition the Central Committee of the Communist Party has a Department of Education and Propaganda, which supervises both the Party Schools and also all other education from the political standpoint. There was a school for specialists on Sinkiang under direct supervision of the Moscow Central Committee, where agitators and propagandists, potential cell leaders and secret agents, were trained for work in that area. The students were usually mature and well-indoctrinated communists. During or since the war a new Near Eastern Institute has been established in Tashkent, which has taken over work formerly done by the Military Faculty of the Institute of Oriental Languages in Moscow. The training of military agents and informers constitutes a large part of its work.

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